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E.O. 12958: DECL: AFTER KOREAN UNIFICATION
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KS](#) [KN](#)
SUBJECT: ROKG TO RESTRIC INTER-KOREAN MINISTERIALS NEX WEEK
TO NUCLEAR AND MISSILES

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary and Comment: In separate meetings with the Ambassador on July 6, Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon and Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok said that after a bitter internal fight over whether or not to cancel next week's inter-Korean ministerial, President Roh had tried to square the circle: to announce that the meeting would go ahead as scheduled, but declare that the agenda would be restricted to the missile issue and the resumption of the Six Party Talks. In this way, Seoul would signal to the North Koreans that there could be no "business as usual" in the wake of the launch (i.e. no discussion of inter-Korean economic cooperation or humanitarian aid), without closing off channels of communication with the North. FM Ban, who had recommended canceling the meeting, told the Ambassador that his expectation was that the announcement of a reduced agenda would prompt the North Koreans to pull out of the meeting. Unification Minister Lee, however, in a subsequent meeting, said he believed that there was a chance the North Koreans would still attend, in which case the South Koreans would give them a firm message about the missile launches and the need to return to the 6PT without preconditions. Lee appealed repeatedly for U.S. support.

12. (C) The Ambassador said he appreciated the effort to avoid the impression of "business as usual," which was reinforced by the earlier decision to suspend further humanitarian aid. In his own view, the best outcome would be for the meeting NOT to take place. In commenting publicly on the Korean proposal, Embassy recommends accentuating the positive -- the signal Seoul is sending that routine inter-Korean business cannot proceed in the aftermath of the missile launches. This will increase our chances of persuading Seoul to consider other measures to counter the North Koreans' actions. End Summary and Comment.

FM Ban: Had Favored Canceling Ministerials

13. (C) During a July 7 meeting with the Ambassador, FM Ban received a phone call from NSA Song Min-soon that President Roh had decided in favor of holding the inter-Korean ministerials next week with the agenda restricted to missiles and the Six Party Talks. Ban acknowledged that this had been a very difficult decision. He had favored canceling the meeting, or at least postponing it for a while.

14. (C) However, Ban continued, others (read Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok) had argued that suspending

consideration of the new humanitarian assistance request from North Korea of 500,000 tons of rice and 100,000 tons of fertilizer was a very powerful signal, truly hurting Pyongyang. Moreover, Ban continued, these advocates had a valid point in that the ROK needed to maintain a channel of communications with the North. South Korea had never rejected dialogue with North Korea. It was always the North refusing to come to various meetings and events for one reason or another. President Roh certainly believed the channel should be preserved and used to convey tough messages.

15. (C) The Ambassador said that the international community in general and the 6PT partners in particular should be sending clear united signals of disapproval to Pyongyang in the wake of the missile launches. The Ambassador said that he was not suggesting breaking off all contacts, but that Pyongyang must not get the impression that it was "business as usual." The Ambassador expressed appreciation for the ROK's firm stance that new humanitarian assistance of rice and fertilizer was suspended.

16. (C) Ban said that the decision to restrict the agenda of the ministerials took into account the phone conversation between the two Presidents the previous day and NSA Song Min-soon's consultations in Washington this week. It was quite likely that Pyongyang would refuse to attend the ministerials next week given the restricted agenda. Already, Pyongyang was sending mixed signals, because it had not yet sent the delegation list.

17. (C) The Ambassador emphasized that Seoul and Washington must be together in reacting to the North Korean provocation. Our actions must be equally robust.

Unification Minister Lee: Appeals for U.S. Support

18. (C) In a subsequent meeting, also on July 7, Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok said that the U.S.-ROK alliance was of special significance during this difficult time. Seoul and Washington, along with Beijing, had tried very hard to dissuade North Korea from launching missiles. Still, North Korea persisted. It was an entirely wrong decision; a very dangerous provocation. In his view, North Korea wanted attention so that it could deal directly with the United States. Pyongyang had utterly failed in these objectives; North Korea now found itself in a much worse situation than before, Lee said.

19. (C) Lee also speculated that the reason why so many Nodongs and Scuds were launched was because the Taepodong II launch had failed. The North Koreans wanted to divert attention from the failure of Taepodong II.

110. (C) Lee said that Seoul would respond concretely, supporting the U.S. and international community. Just today, Seoul had cancelled the previously scheduled working-level military officers' talks. The decision on the ministerials next week had been an agonizing one. The "core" agenda would be restricted to the missile issue and the resumption of the 6PT. Perhaps, the North Koreans might not come after learning this agenda.

111. (C) Lee continued that in the ministerials next week, South Korea would urge the North to return to the 6PT. If it refused to return, there would be no economic assistance from South Korea. Even without North Korea, Seoul would work vigorously to hold a meeting of the 6PT with just the five. Lee said that Seoul's suspension of 500,000 tons of rice aid was a lot more powerful than Japan's ten-point sanctions.

112. (C) The Ambassador said that it was crucially important for the international community to tell North Koreans that its behavior was inexcusable. While Washington did not want to escalate the situation, we also believed that Pyongyang must know that it had made a serious miscalculation, and that there was no business as usual. The Ambassador would have preferred an outright cancellation of the ministerials, but,

perhaps, if the agenda was strictly restricted to nuclear and missile issues, the ROK could indeed convey a message to Pyongyang. Noting Lee's reference to the alliance, the Ambassador said that the U.S. and ROK should now work together closely to convince North Korea to return to the 6PT so that the September 19 Joint Statement could be implemented. This was the goal and prize, the Ambassador said.

¶13. (C) Lee said that the current difficulty was also an opportunity. Washington should be completely assured that Seoul was a strong partner in the alliance. He counted on the Ambassador to explain to Washington the logic behind why he would meet his North Korean counterpart next week. He urged the U.S. to support President Roh's decision to hold the meeting with a restricted agenda.

Comment

¶14. (C) While we have not asked for the cancellation of the ministerials under instruction, we have, nevertheless, told the South Koreans on several occasions that they must give clear signals that inter-Korean dialogue and assistance should not proceed as if nothing has happened. We are disappointed that the meeting will be held in Pusan next week, assuming the North Koreans come.

¶15. (C) Within the Roh Administration, this is once again a victory of the so-called "engagers" over the diplomats. Lee Jong-seok got his way because President Roh is a like-minded engager. Their bottom-line is that dialogue with North Korea must be preserved, because without it South Korea does not have a North Korea policy.

¶16. (C) Perhaps the meeting next week will truly be restricted to discussions of nuclear and missile issues. We don't know. At minimum, we are inclined to believe that these two issues will feature prominently--not necessarily a bad outcome. For this reason, we recommend that in commenting publicly on the ministerials, we should accentuate the positive: that Seoul is approaching the meeting with the goal of stopping further missile launches and seeking the resumption of the 6PT, rather than engaging in discussion of new economic and humanitarian aid. This will encourage the ROK delegation toward this direction and increase our chances of persuading Seoul to consider other measures to counter the North Koreans' actions.

VERSHBOW